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The observatory

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THE OBSERVATORY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

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Abstract

In this thesis my goal is to paint a universe of my creation which is filled with clues that reveal the underlying relationships of things: spirals that ancient man carved in stone, sprouting fiddle ferns emerging from the earth, spinning particles in an atomic clocks, shells, heads of sunflowers, orbiting stars, swirling dervishes, dancing planets and tender tendrils reaching for the sun. As a working artist, keeping a journal helps me organize my thoughts. I have therefore chosen to present this narrative in journal form.

The Observatory

September 15, 2003

As I walk across the campus of Louisiana State University I feel the mystery of the past. I am haunted by what has gone before on this patch of land. After World War II, my father attended LSU. At that time the Field House was the center of social activities. A rare snow day found my mother sliding down the Indian mounds in an old bathtub. From the fifties, time unfolds backwards—sugar cane fields expand to the Mississippi River that lapped at the ridge above Nicholson Drive. The Bayougoula and Mugulasha Indians fished and worshiped their gods until the French sailed down the river.

October 3, 2003

So, here I am returning to the land of my fathers, hoping to find my own voice in my paintings. What I want is to paint. Now is the time.

October 5, 2003

I seem to be looking within myself, yet I am looking elsewhere at the same time.

November 10, 2003

I find inspiration in alchemy, architecture, astronomy and archeology. What is the connection? Is there a connection? Each field of study begs interest.

November 30, 2003

Exploration is exciting and bewildering at the same time. Standing here in my studio, I try different means of expression. I collage an image of an ancient building over a copy of an early medieval portrait of a saint. The building is seen in plan; the portrait is viewed straight on. The piece feels right. However, other attempts fail. I am a miner wearing a lamp hat. Wherever I

turn my head I shine a light, looking for images that convey my truth, and reveal underlying relationships that often go unnoticed.

December 5, 2003

Reading about alchemy leads me to think about medieval images. Mystic diagrams and alphabets reveal structures of a universe that man could only imagine before modern science peeled away layers of mystery and created new mysteries. The alphabet of the alchemist is intriguing, so I copy the letters in paint. Using my brush as a calligraphic tool, I study each mark. These strange letters are not enough. They do not convey content; they are only gestures and images. I want my paintings to communicate a truth about the world and man.

December 12, 2003

I search the library, finding medieval images of astronomy and astrology. These early diagrams of the universe are compelling and inspire me to create a universe of my own.

January 10, 2004

I visit an archeologist on campus and examine Indian pottery found in the mud of the Mississippi. The designs of the Indian pots flow and undulate like waves, seen from an aerial view of the river, or like the mark of a worm's tracks on a leaf. I am one with the maker of this pot, someone who lived a few thousand years ago.

February 14, 2004

I heard there was an ancient city in Louisiana—a city that was older than the Egyptian pyramids. Today I take a long drive to Poverty Point, wondering along the way what the inhabitants called it. The area is rural and appears to be poor; yet the land is rich. I pass soybean and cotton fields. The Indians, whose tribal name is unknown because they have no recorded history, must have found it a prosperous place to live. Archeologists believe that this ancient city was abandoned

because the delta was so rich in fish and wildlife that the people were free to roam and had no need to live in large groups for survival. The pattern of the earthworks, weakened by time and settlers, inspires me. Questions arise: why are the streets laid out in a semi-circle arching the river? What is the reasoning behind the placement of the sacred earth mounds? In the museum, displayed like jewels, are bits of earth shaped by these earlier peoples: beads, dice, bulbous-shaped clay balls used in cooking, and earth-mother figures.

April 23, 2004

I have spent weeks painting and drawing my impressions of Poverty Point. Something is wrong; I feel too removed from my subject.

May 12, 2004

Paul Dean visits my studio. "Think like an Indian," he says.

May 30, 2004

Sitting by my cousin's pool, I see a rock with a small hole in it. It is a place to grind a seed or start a fire. Am I thinking like an American Indian? Great Grandmother Pippin was part Cherokee—her presence and DNA connect me to something.

June 13, 2004

I realize I have merely been painting images, not making images. To make an image requires a different way of looking and trusting in my imagination. All the teachers I have ever studied with are commenting on my painting; I am integrating their voices yet making my own art. This is evident in a series of charcoal drawings titled *Worlds*. I choose gray paper, conté and charcoal materials I learned to appreciate at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. There Bruce Samuelson encouraged me to develop my own style. He called similar works "floating worlds."

In Miami, Roberto Martinez suggested making marks like waves washing on shore. Now, I am an alchemist and astronomer, creating worlds in my imagination.

November 25, 2003

Here in Louisiana I feel the presence of the trees and earth unlike any other place I have lived.

Here the land is close; the trees cap the sky. Life is beating slowly everywhere; if I close my eyes I remember the crickets' song and the fireflies' dance. When I lived in Florida and the Caribbean, the land was flat and the sky met the horizon over ribbons of turquoise sea. Vastness. In the painting *Waters of Life* I have placed a horizon in the lower third of the painting. An immense space rises above the water, full of possibility.

January 8, 2004

Beachcombing: spiraling shells, strange blowfish washed ashore, a bivalve shell lay open like a butterfly on the sand. I carefully held spiky sea urchins in my hand; coconuts bobbed, lost at sea. On weekends I snorkeled with my father. Under the waves we saw brilliantly colored reefs and schools of crayola-colored fish. An old speckled grouper lumbered by—not yellow and blue, but brown and gray. A lesson to be learned about the use of bright color - always keep a neutral nearby.

February 24, 2005

I remember the Caribbean nights before the sky became night pink, a telescope was set up on the patio, and we looked at the moon. I remember the sound of wind in the palm trees as I made up a song about the cycles of the sky. My mind became an observatory in which I imagined the universe and its movements.

March 20, 2005

Cycles, spheres, and circles are all basic elements of the universe. In Sufi meditation one rolls one's head in a circle while saying a prayer. Dervishes whirl. A photo of an atomic clock hangs on my studio wall; its geometric elements are circles and spirals. Science has created new mysteries. It is not the knowing that holds my attention. It is the question. There is an indefinable beauty in mystery, and mystery fuels imagination. In my world of painting, facts and analytical data close windows of imagination. They become like the alchemist's alphabet, marks that speak only to analytical minds.

April 1, 2005

In order to free my imagination I must create passageways into other realms: sometimes music is a road, sometimes prayer, sometimes daydreams are doors.

April 16, 2005

Looking for cycles is a compulsion. Spiraling ferns emerge, seeds are stars and the micro evolves into the macro. Grandmothers were once little girls. My grandmother passed memories of her childhood down to me through stories. She told me tales of an Indian named Joe and of the "little people," which feed my imagination. I am fascinated with other cultures and their way of living and seeing. Native Americans see their place in the vastness of the universe and live with that awareness. By shifting scale in my painting, a flower shape becomes an angel that flies overhead. The vastness of space appears. In the painting *Waters of Life*, monumental blue flower shapes spill marks of paint. Scale is not in context. These marks might be seeds or stars.

May 17, 2005

When I was small, I watched bubbles forming in puddles during Louisiana's rainy days. These bubbles became the "little people." *National Geographic* featured dwellings of people halfway

around the world, in places like Africa or Indonesia. The modern world had yet to invade their lives. They lived in roundhouses or huts made of earth and twigs. In my child's mind these were the villages where grandmother's stories took place. Often in my paintings I see twigs and twisted leaves emerge, and I know that there are stories hidden within the marks. When I make a mark that is slow and ribbon-like, I am painting a dance. A fast deliberate dash is footpath. A sphere is a bubble.

June 3, 2005

Today I saw a movie entitled *Cosmic Africa*. It was about an African, Thebe Medupe, who is an astro-physicist. He felt disconnected from himself. His solution was to visit his people, still living as they did thousands of years ago, in the sub-Saharan desert. He found the first observatory known to have been built by man. He also found stories that connected him to his life's work; these were stories that his ancient ancestors told. Once, seven thousand years ago, the sub-Saharan desert was a fertile land where people raised cattle and built an observatory of stone. Thebe believes that the people watching the stars and the changes in climate realized the land would no longer support them. They moved on, leaving behind their ancestors' graves and observatories. Thebe Medupe's travels reflect my own path.

July 14, 2005

Here at Louisiana State University, I found a paper written by Kenneth Bercher and William G. Hagg entitled *The Astronomical Alignments at Poverty Point*. Just as the early Africans observed the sky, so too did the earliest inhabitants of Louisiana. Man looks to the sky: the sun, the birds, and the stars; we are all interconnected. A dear friend, Apple Vail, long dead, once told me that "painting is seeking."

August 28, 2005

My sister woke me up this morning screaming, "Get out of there NOW." A monster storm is on the way.

September 6, 2005

Hurricane Katrina has hit. I paint; it is my only consolation.

September 15, 2005

We are living with images of devastation: homes washed away, coffins and bodies floating in the streets, New Orleanians sitting on the expressway surrounded by barbed wire, waiting for days to be rescued; four thousand are missing. We are not all-powerful. Phones don't work, electricity is out, gas prices are sky high, and our government is confused. Is this what happened to the inhabitants of Poverty Point? Have we destroyed our land, or like the sub-Saharan, is it Time? Time to change. Are we floating in a giant cycle of life?

September 30, 2005

The cycles and spheres make their first appearance in my paintings. Starting a new painting, a large elliptical shape emerges from the chaos. At first, all the shape can be is the eye of a hurricane. Making this shape is a satisfying gesture. Could this be the path the planets follow as they move around the sun? A circle drawn in perspective is an ellipse; it creates space. Some artists use grids or the golden mean to aid them in composing their paintings. Can I use an ellipse? The elliptic shape is difficult; it leaves strange spaces in the corners of the canvas.

October 10, 2005

I have named the first elliptic painting *Katrina*. So much is uncertain since the hurricane. But, seeds and flowers grow. Pea plant tendrils reach into the space of *Katrina*. Line is a tether; it

helps me control the space in my paintings; it is the web of the spider holding a world together. Calder uses lines to create space and form in his *Circle Series*.¹ Throughout Miro's entire body of work line is employed.² I am especially interested in *Constellations*, a series of small gouache paintings he did during the war years of 1940-41. Studying Miro's work has given me insight into my own work. Gravity doesn't apply, there is a freedom in his organic shapes as they float in space, and line snakes its way in and out, directing attention to selected parts of the composition.

October 23, 2005

If I am not careful, the elliptic shapes will enclose the composition, making it too static. I want my paintings to flow. In *Cosmos I*, I struggle with the ellipse. It must remain open, yet still retain form. My solution is in the play of edges. Some fade while others tighten.

November 8, 2005

I rented a movie entitled *Rivers and Tides* by an Irish artist, Andy Goldsworthy. The title piqued my interest as New Orleans sits in muddy water. Goldsworthy builds a sculpture on the beach out of twigs close at hand. Then he waits—the tide rises and captures his creation; it softly spins a dance, encouraging the twigs to go their separate ways. The simplicity of nature and the rawness of his materials touches my sensibilities. How do I bring this simplicity into my work? Can I?

December 1, 2005

Simplicity and nature—I feel they are contradictions. When I look at the vast interconnecting web of nature, I question my ability to simplify. The only answer is all is one. Parts of the universe are complex, and parts are simple. I can only paint parts. I will never paint the whole. But, I strive for each painting to have a sense of the whole.

¹ Jean Lipman, *Calder's Universe* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1976), 92-101.

December 30, 2005

The whole is a unified surface; it is not necessarily a unified texture, it is a unified composition.

The images move throughout the two-dimensional space, creating their own space. Shifts in scale is a technique that I find helpful; scale not only of the image, but also of the mark. In the series entitled *Gardenscapes*, on four 20x20 canvases, I push space, allowing the small to take on monumental scale. Simple shifts in color temperature aid me in constructing this cosmos. A warm purple gray moves forward while a cool umber gray pushes back into the space.

January 5, 2006

Color is the only way I know there is light. Colors vibrate, creating energy and movement—suggesting life. When we say, "someone's color is bad," we know they are sick. When we speak of "rosy-cheeked children" we are delighting in life.

February 15, 2006

Time spent in the Caribbean and south Florida has influenced my painting palette. Even the years spent at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, in the gray light of Philadelphia, did not dull my color. Examining the body of work for my thesis exhibition I am aware of the process of creation: starting with memory and feeling, the work then evolves through the process of painting the image, editing and repainting until the image I seek emerges.

March 23, 2006

Thomas Mann wrote, "nature produces such a plethora of things that have a puzzling way of spilling over into the realm of magic—ambiguous mood, half-concealed allusions that insinuate

² The Arts Council of Great Britain (London: The Crewn Press, 1964), 40.

some eerie uncertainty."³ This is a sophisticated description of the world I sense and see; it does not convey the feeling of child like awe that lies at the heart of my work.

Our hearts are set in the heavens
It is there our hearts are set,
In the expanse of the heavens.⁴
Pawnee Native Americans

³ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 13.

⁴ Neil Philip, *Earth Always Endures* (New York: Viking, 1996), 80.



Acanthus 57''x57'' Oil



Japanese Magnolia 57''x57'' Oil



Cosmos I 36''x60'' Oil



Gardenscape I 20''x20'' Oil



Gardenscape II 20''x20'' Oil



Awake 24"x36" Oil



Reaching 24"x36" Oil



Waters of Life 56"x56" Oil



Katrina 42"x48" Oil



Worlds I, II, III 20"x30" Charcoal, conte'

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Vita

René Fletcher was born in Denver, Colorado, and grew up in the South and the Bahamas. She spent her youth combing beaches and playing under the oak trees of Louisiana.

After René graduated from Coral Gables High School in Florida, she followed family tradition and received a Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Interior Design from Louisiana State University. Upon graduation she began working as an interior designer and later owned her own antique store. During this time she continued to study painting and drawing.

In 1994 René moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts four-year certificate program. Upon graduation she started teaching art and in 2003 René began working on the degree of Master of Fine Art from Louisiana State University.